A MESSAGE TO THE UNITARIAN CHURCHES

Report of the Council to the General Conference of Unitarian and other Christian Churches.

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A Message
To the Unitarian Churches

Being the Report of the Council
to the General Conference of
Unitarian and Other Christian Churches
at Cleveland, Ohio, October 14, 1925

American Unitarian Association
16 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.

FOREWORD

The General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches, originally known as the National Conference, was organized at New York on April 5th, 1865, and has held its Biennial Sessions regularly until the closing session held at Cleveland, Ohio, in October, 1925. It has been the custom of the Conference to require its governing Council, through its Chairman, to report at each Biennial Session "on the State of the Churches," with recommendations as to their future activities.

At the meeting at Cleveland which marked the union of the General Conference with the American Unitarian Association, the Chairman of the Council of the Conference presented the customary report or Message to the Churches, and it was voted that it be printed and distributed. The Association, as the heir to the obligations of the Conference has, therefore, printed this Message and now transmits it to the churches with the hope that it will be read, pondered, and acted upon.

In 1923 the General Conference appointed a Commission on Regional Conferences, and this Commission through its Chairman, Rev. James C. Duncan, presented its report at Cleveland on October 14, 1925. The recommendations of the Commission for the better organizing of our denominational endeavors, particularly through the Regional Conferences, were adopted by the Conference and have since been approved and endorsed by the Directors of the American Unitarian Association. These recommendations are, therefore, appended to this Message to the Churches and are respectfully commended to the ministers and members of our fellowship.

A Message to the Unitarian Churches, Being the Report of the Council to the General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches at Cleveland, Ohio, October 14th, 1925.

By

Sydney B. Snow, Chairman of the Council

THE reorganization of our denomination, initiated at a meeting of the General Conference four years ago, continued at its meeting two years ago and now completed, is the union or marriage of two bodies, not the swallowing up of one by the other. It does not dry up a dying stream; it brings into one current two living streams of denominational activity and expression. The name of the Conference, it is true, is to disappear and the name of the Association retained; but the organization thus formed continues the traditions of both and is something more than either. The American Unitarian Association of 1925, outwardly maintaining its existence unbroken under its old name, is, at the beginning of its second century, practically a new body. In the union, in other words, the American Unitarian Association has been modified as greatly by the General Conference as the Conference has been modified by the Association.

In one respect the Association has been modified by the Conference in a way little short of revolutionary, effecting a change in its constitution which by many has long been hoped for. The old Association was originally a society of individuals. Some fifty years ago by the admission of delegate membership the churches took practical control of its administration though individual membership was continued. The Association has now taken over from the Conference its completely representative and democratic organization, and will ultimately become,

by its new system of appointing delegates, and by its discontinuance of the creation of voting life members, what the Conference was from the outset—a society of churches. This brings the management of our denominational affairs directly into the charge of the representatives of the bodies that constitute the denomination, namely, the churches.

Another important modification in the American Unitarian Association, brought about by its union with the General Conference, is the provision for the continuance of the Conference sessions. This too is a change long desired by many interested in the Association and one which the Council of this Conference believes will be of increasing importance as time goes on. Under its old by-laws the Association had only one day of general assembly in the year, and that assembly for legal reasons had to be held in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In practice it has always been held in Boston during the month of May. Of necessity this meeting has been given over chiefly to the hearing of reports and the transaction of business. There has not been time, nor has the crowded Anniversary Week given the atmosphere, for free discussion of denominational policies and denominational aims. Many churches, distant from Boston, have been only infrequently represented, and have consequently felt out of touch with the work and purposes of the Association. The biennial fall conferences, of which this is the first, continuing the tradition of the General Conference, will give to the new Association what the old Association lacked, a forum for discussion. The meetings may be held in any part of the United States and Canada, and will bring to churches infrequently represented in Boston occasional opportunity for full participation in denominational deliberations. They may be held for as many days as are desired (as in the past probably for three or four) and questions of policy as well as statements of ideals can

be thoroughly threshed out. The officers of the Association are likely to find in the biennial conference a means of keeping in touch with the sentiment of their constituency, and the churches through their representatives an occasion for sympathetic consideration of the hopes and plans of those who bear the burden of leadership, which cannot fail to be beneficial to both. Delegates will, we hope, go back to their churches with an understanding of denominational affairs that it has not been possible to give so directly before, and stimulated to a sense of responsibility which has sometimes been lacking in the past.

This sense of responsibility is likely to be strengthened by the more responsible character of the body which holds the meetings. The old General Conference was not a continuously active body, and was not intended by its founders to be an active body. It administered no funds, maintained no headquarters, and, except for the fellowshipping of ministers, had no permanently supported interests. Its purpose was to provide for the Unitarian churches of America, and for others of their point of view, a clearing house for ideas and ideals—a voice for self-expression. It was stipulated in the constitution that the carrying out of active programmes should be left to other bodies. This laid the Conference open to the charge that it was nothing but a platform; and, if an organization may justly be criticized for being only what it set out to be, the charge was deserved. Nevertheless behind the criticism, which we have shown was unjust, lay a perception that something was wrong—that talk and action ought not to be so divorced. This defect in our denominational organization has now been remedied. If, in the union of our two bodies, the Conference has brought to the Association its democratic control and its opportunity for free discussion, the Association has brought its background of a century of activity along many lines, its invested funds, its permanent headquarters and its staff of

officers, giving their full time to denominational affairs. Decisions made at any of the meetings of a body so constituted involve the possibility of effective action. No longer can the delegates disperse from one of our fall conferences and say: "What does it all amount to but talk?" For these meetings are official meetings of the new American Unitarian Association—a body which exists, not merely for the purpose of conferring biennially, but is "on the job" all the time.

In reporting on the state of the churches during the two years that the present Council has held office, therefore, the union of the General Conference and the American Unitarian Association, consummated during the centenary year of the Association, must be presented as the significant achievement. That achievement is nothing less than the reorganization, along lines suited to the needs and methods of our second century, of our fellowship of free churches. In the reorganization the function of the General Conference as our spiritual guide is by no means lost, but may be carried on more potently, because more closely connected with our practical activities. For our churches, associated by a new constitution, under one name, it is no idle dream to foresee greater possibilities than ever of the realization of our common purpose—"more and better work for the Kingdom of God."

Counting upon a new unity of purpose, of which our surprisingly unanimous reorganization is a symbol, the Council calls upon the churches to take the long step forward for which it believes the time to be ripe. Money will be required in making this progress—money in quantities, in proportion to our other giving and in a continuous stream, such as we have not known before; but the Council is confident that money in ample sums will be forthcoming. The need and the uses of money for the next five years will be fully presented at this meeting by those responsible for the Unitarian Foundation, and

details would be out of place in this report. The Council would like, however, to call attention again to a fact often noticed, that our denomination, counting in its membership many generous givers to all sorts of good causes, has never (probably because of the varied interests of its constituency) been able to count on support for its enterprises on the same scale as other churches. If we have faith in our cause, and in its great consequence to America and the world, this will never be said of us again. We who protest devotion to our church will make it chief, not secondary, in our giving.

A special reason for such an attitude at this time is in the opportunity that we face. At no stage in our history, not even when our denomination was formed a hundred years ago, has so fair a field or so ripe a harvest lain before us. During that hundred years changes in human thought and the widening of human knowledge have undercut the foundations of traditional Christian belief; and orthodox Christian churches, the rank and file of whose membership are only now becoming aware of this fact, bewildered by the discovery, are for the most part engaged in the vain attempt to go back—to recover the lost ideal of a church strong and united by enforced unity of thought. During the same period our church, founded on a basis of freedom, has been able to adapt itself to changed conditions, and has found that although in a scientific age the thought forms of Christianity must be restated, its essence is undisturbed—that it is no more dependent to-day on an authoritative Bible or a specially created Christ, than it was dependent a century ago on the truth of the doctrine of the trinity. We know what most of the older churches have yet to learn, that essential Christianity has no relation to dogma, but is a spirit; and that men of one spirit need not think alike to worship together. We have discovered that unity is possible in diversity, that fellowship can be had in freedom.

These treasures of discovery constitute a precious heritage, and entail upon us a very real responsibility. From every side we hear that a new church, to meet the new spirit in humanity, is needed; ours is that church, if we can make those who need it understand. We are custodians of a tradition and an institution which meet the spiritual lack of the day—a tradition of freedom in religious thought, an institution devoted to religion but untrammeled by dogma. For a hundred years our church has been as a voice crying in the wilderness; now it is being perceived that what we have proclaimed is the key to the religion of the future. It is a thrilling thing to be a member of the Unitarian Church, and a worker in the Unitarian cause, to-day. For we believe that unless the spirit which that cause represents prevails in Christendom the Christian Church, in an age of constant discovery of truth and revision of accepted ideas, is doomed. No less a mission than to develop that which is of permanent value in Christianity to ensure its continuance as an effective religious impulse in the world that is dawning, is the mission before us in our historic year 1925.

To accomplish that mission our first task is to strengthen our own denomination and widen its interests. We must make our fellowship of churches and all the churches that comprise it strong in organization as they have always been strong in men and women—efficient instruments for missionary effort. Without relinquishing any of our liberty as individuals, we must learn to work together as never before, not merely for our own spiritual comfort and inspiration, but for the extension of our faith to others. In a world that is seriously questioning the value of churches, we must give convincing demonstration of their worth. Not only by keeping our teaching in harmony with truth as it is discovered, but by relating our activities to the great humanitarian move-

ments, social, economic and international, which are religion's important outward expression to-day, we must show that our church meets living needs and aspirations. Personal religion that is expressed in lives of service, nurtured in a church of vigorous social idealism—these are lights that cannot be hidden under a bushel, but will blaze on the hill-tops.

In the great mission thus outlined, however, we make no pretension of being alone. Our adherence for a century to the principle of freedom, and the completely undogmatic character of our message, place us clearly and definitely on what is known as the "modernist" side in the religious issue of the day, but we are not singular in our position. Other churches exist on practically the same free foundation as ours, and proclaim a similar gospel; and in many churches, not themselves free, are brave bands of forward-looking, modern-minded men and women striving to bring them into harmony with the mind and heart of our times. Our future lies together. Some of these liberals may be slow and fearful to recognize their kinship with us, but we recognize ours with them. We greet them as comrades; we watch with sympathy their up-hill fight; we long for the day when we will be able to work shoulder to shoulder for the common cause. As one among many denominations our church can continue to do the useful but restricted work that it has done in the past. As part of a wider fellowship of free churches it can begin to fulfil the mission which is hinted at in this report The Council of the General Conference, therefore, calls upon the churches affiliated in the American Unitarian Association not only to strengthen their own organization and to increase their missionary activity, but to be ready for the co-operation with other liberal bodies that is essential not only to our own future but to the survival of Christianity as well. In our next century a regrouping of religious

forces in America and the world is inevitable. Those churches which are immersed in merely denominational propaganda, are liable to find themselves outside the main currents of religious life. Those which will sink their minor differences in genuine devotion to the Kingdom of God may go forward confidently to a great future.

The Christian Church early in its history developed into a great institution—great in wealth, great in power—but in that development it departed far from the spirit of its founder, which is now seen to be more in harmony with what we call modern thought than with the creeds that attempt to define what Christianity is. To-day that mighty institution is learning that in gaining the world it almost lost its soul; and finds itself chained to the past while the spirit of Christ belongs to the future. But through the history of the Church has run a golden thread of heresy, in its failure truer to that spirit than orthodoxy in its triumph. It is our part to keep our place in that unofficial apostolic succession, which obedient to the law of change, as a writer of our day has phrased it, has been obedient to the law of God. The beginning of our second century as a denomination falls in the same year as the sixteen-hundredth anniversary of the Council of Nicea, which in 325 imposed upon Christendom a creed completely out of harmony with modern thought. As we watch the institution built on that creed crumbling, the duty is laid on us not merely of reiterating the protest of a century ago against it, but of helping to build the Church anew—a church free in thought, sincere in worship, rich in good lives, that shall reclaim the loyalty of many socially-minded men and women, now adrift from their religious moorings, by leading in the world's social regeneration. We approach that duty humbly, not desiring so much to make our denomination great, as to play our part worthily in a great movement.

Recommendations of the Commission on Regional Conferences, Adopted by the General Conference and Approved by the Directors of the American Unitarian Association

I. We recommend that every church should, as far as feasible, form a central council consisting of the officers of the church and the heads of its various organizations, to confer regularly with the minister concerning the work that the church should undertake, not alone for its own welfare but also for service to mankind in its community and in meeting its wider obligations through the Conference with which it is connected and through the American Unitarian Association.

II. We recommend that every conference should secure the service of a wide-awake, practical and energetic secretary, preferably, for economic reasons, a minister in charge of a church, to keep in touch with the churches belonging to the Conference he serves, to acquaint himself with the opportunities for missionary activity, and for social service field work within its borders and report the same to the directors and churches of the Conference and to the Administrative Vice-President of the American Unitarian Association. Without competing with, or in any way superseding the work of the Association the Conference should co-operate with it and assume some measure of responsibility for carrying on and for enlarging the missionary endeavors and field work within its limits. In addition to his other duties the Conference secretary should see that the programs of the meetings are arranged with a view to producing tangible and practical results, keeping in mind the value of the round table or group method, but not confining them solely to receiving addresses upon and the discus-

sion of theoretical topics. He should remind the ministers of the churches in the Conference he serves of the importance of advance publicity in respect to meetings, by notifying, if need be, by mail, all their members of the time and place and purpose of the meeting.

III. We recommend that the American Unitarian Association enhance the sense of responsibility of the Conferences by seeking their counsel concerning the advisability of any help to established churches or any new missionary enterprises contemplated within the borders of their conferences.

IV. We recommend that the President of the American Unitarian Association should arrange for the holding of regular meetings of its executive officers with the officers of every other major organization of the denomination and the secretaries of every conference for the purpose of comparing notes, preparing a uniform program, to be modified to suit local conditions, considering the objectives for which the denomination as a whole should work, the most effective distribution of the churches into groups for meeting in Conference, and the wisest policy to be pursued in governing their relation to the American Unitarian Association.

V. We recommend that the Conferences cultivate and their editorial agencies express a friendly and fraternal spirit towards other liberal churches and outstanding liberal leaders in religion of whatever name.

VI. We recommend that every Conference should urge the churches composing it to arrange, as soon as possible, with the American Unitarian Association, the Unitarian Laymen's League, the Ministerial Union and with every other organization that can be helpful, to hold missions for the preaching of Liberal Religion and for the practical application of our ideals for service to mankind.

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